

In defense of freedom

Story by Justin Ward

"I didn't feel the pain. I just felt the impact. Like I kicked a rock. I thought, 'Something must have happened down there.' "

- Pete Corona, Italy Resident Office

Pete Corona, District construction representative, Italy Resident Office, stands aboard a convoy heading back to Camp Anaconda Iraq in March 2004, only a day after being hit in the foot with shrapnel.

As a boy growing up in Mexico City, Pedro Corona played a lot of soccer. It was always easy to find friends and start a pick-up game, and it helped him develop a friendly, open personality.

Years later, when Pedro came to the United States to attend college in Portland, Ore., his friendly personality helped him transition well. He made friends, found work, met his wife.

Eventually, Pedro, now Pete, enlisted in the Air Force and served proudly for 21 years, supporting Operation Desert Storm and other dangerous operations along the way. He joined the Air Force because he wanted to give back to a country that had offered him so much, to a country he now calls home.

On August 18, Corona, 53, humbly accepted the Defense of Freedom Medal for suffering shrapnel wounds to his foot during a mêlée in Iraq in spring 2004. However, he wasn't in Iraq as a warfighter. He was there as a volunteer civilian,

Defense of Freedom Medal



OBVERSE



REVERSE

The front of the Defense of Freedom medal shows a bald eagle holding a shield. "On Behalf of a Grateful Nation" is inscribed on the back, with space below for the recipient's name. The ribbon's red stripes commemorate valor and sacrifice. The wide blue stripe represents strength. The white stripes symbolize liberty.

serving the country he adopted as home, as a member of a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Forward Engineering Support Team.

Southern European Task Force Commander Maj. Gen. Frank G. Helmick presented the award to Corona saying, "You know what Winston Churchill said about people like Pedro, 'You make a living by getting; such as getting money,





Photo by Christina Bohrmann

Pete Corona and then-Capt. Thomas Asbery arrive at a damaged bridge on the highway between Baghdad and Balad. Their task was to assess the usability of the bridge using reach back technology.

cars, a big house, but you make a life by giving, and this man ... gives.' ”

The medal is the civilian equivalent of the Purple Heart, and was inaugurated on Sept. 27, 2001, after the Pentagon attack. The medal is a formal means to recognize civilians injured while supporting a mission. Corona is only the fifth Corps of Engineers civilian to receive it.

“The real heroes do not come home, and I did,” Corona said. “I like the recognition this country gives to its people, especially the ones that, while knowing of the dangers, are willing to serve. Some come back with worse injuries than others. I can walk, and the pain I sometimes feel is just a remainder of how blessed I am. But, I will do it again!”

The Incident

It was Corona’s second time volunteering for a six-month tour in Iraq, providing engineering support to the shambled country badly in need of infrastructure expertise. “We knew the risks,” he said of the trip. But he also knew he was needed.

Corona was stationed out of Camp Anaconda, near Balad, on the Tigris not too far north of Baghdad. His orders were to assess the usability of a bridge the Marines were tasked to protect.

“[The Marines] knew what they were doing,” he said. “They knew the bridge was blown and needed repair. So, we all three came to evaluate the bridge

and give the information back.”

Corona was deployed with then-Capt. Thomas Asbery, a District project manager, and Christina Bohrmann, a former District employee. Asbery, the team leader, had just finished a teleconference about the bridge with engineers in the States and Corona and Bohrmann were taking a break from the scorching sun.

Corona stood in the shade of a utility trailer about 100 yards from the bridge.

It was a stifling afternoon near Baghdad that day. Corona was talking to his wife on a satellite phone, reassuring her that he was fine. “I told her we’re all safe,” he said.

While cooling, Corona finished his phone conversation and sighed a relaxing sigh. He was safe. The mission was over. He could now go back to base camp.

Asbery walked up to him and simply encouraged him to relax and cool down. “Just take your time,” Corona recounted Asbery saying. “If you get too hot, you can go home,” to which he said he replied “yeah, yeah, yeah. I’m fine.”

Less than a minute later, the violent scream of two enemy mortars tore through the sky.

Corona took immediate cover, diving underneath the utility trailer, the closest safeguard he could find.

He said his foot felt like it hit the ground a second before it should have. “ ‘Maybe it was just a rock,’ I thought.”